Cal Poly Views

Poetry with Dr. Jack Fulbeck

Cal Poly Pomona University Library

Poetry Summary

Cal Poly Views was a weekly interview series broadcast on radio station KWOW-AM. Episodes were 15 minutes long and were hosted by Cal Poly Pomona Director of News and Publications, Ed Pierce, in conversation with Cal Poly Pomona faculty or administrators on general interest topics.

Dr. Jack Fulbeck was a professor in the English and Foreign Languages Department at Cal Poly Pomona. He taught classes in poetry, published his own poems, and won many first-place awards in poetry contests.

Subject Headings

Poetry

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Cal Poly Views Poetry with Dr. Jack Fulbeck

November 22, 1985

Interview conducted by Ed Pierce
Transcribed by Lorecel Gravino

KWOW presents "Cal Poly Views."

EP: Hello everyone. Welcome to KWOW's presentation of "Cal Poly Views," fifteen minutes each week, devoted to interviews concerning subjects of current general interest and featuring faculty or administrators from Cal Poly Pomona. This is your host Ed Pierce, talking today with Dr. Jack Fulbeck, Professor of English and Foreign Languages, at Cal Poly Pomona and together we'll discuss poetry and whether it is for everyone.

EP: Today's guest Dr. Fulbeck, professor in the English and Foreign Languages Department since 1958, has taught several classes in poetry, is the author of two books of verse, whose poems have often appeared in periodicals and other publications, and has won many first place awards in poetry contests.

EP: He's a frequent speaker on poetic topics and nationally known for his poetry and as a judge of the poetic efforts of others. President of the California State Poetry Society in 1981 and '82, he has been named professor emeritus of that group. Welcome Dr. Fulbeck.

JF: Thank you Ed, but that group didn't make me professor.

EP: Oh President-emeritus, excuse me. Tell us first, what is a poem, if you can, in ten easy words or less.

JF: I can't. Poems have been defined and are in many dictionaries, but I don't think the definitions are satisfactory, Ed. Poets themselves, who tried to define a poem, have always come close to giving us something very subjective. Another wall the one I prefer, and this might be an answer to your question is by the poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, who said a poem, "is indefinable, but unmistakable." I'll leave you with that.

EP: Alright. Let me go to what is prose then, could we hear a prose and poetry?

JF: That, yes that question presumes that they are necessarily different and I don't accept that either, in this sense that I look upon poetry as a quality. Therefore, chapter one, of Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, for example, about South Africa, has a poetic quality that raises that above the level you mean by prose. That's called a poetic prose at least. Alternatively, someone might right 14 lines of iambic pentameter with a specific rhyme scheme and say I have a sonnet. Mechanically he does, but he may not have a poem; it may be prosaic.

EP: Two phrases you just used that probably all of us heard as school children and may not remember however, would you tell us what iambic pentameter is?

JF: Yes. Penta, of course, "five" as in the Pentagon, a meter for meter, so penta-meter. Pentameter is a verse, a line of structured verse with five beats in it and if those beats are characteristically 'I am' that is iambic, so I have to tell you that "I am"—

EP: Yes.

JF: —is a poetic foot and a poetic foot is simply a group of syllables with a specific stress pattern. The "I am" happens to be two syllables, with the second stress, as in the word "today" or in the name "Marie." So, if you have five of those, or they dominate the line, it's iambic pentameter.

EP: And would you tell me what a sonnet is?

JF: A sonnet, as I said before, technically, is 14 lines by iambic pentameter with specific rhyme scheme. I'll leave it at that because there are variations in the rhyme scheme because there are various sonnets, one coming from Petrarch for instance, one from Wordsworth, one from Shakespeare, with some differences.

EP: Is there poetry that does not rhyme?

JF: Oh yes.

EP: And does it have a name?

JF: Generally, it's called free verse. If you accept my acceptance of Paton's first chapter of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, then that is depends on rhythm and imagery and diction. But it does present to me in the poetic quality.

EP: Free verse, literally, I presume, means "free." That is, different than blank verse that has forms, is that right?

JF: Yes, there's nothing free about blank verse at all. Blank verse is heavily structured, it happens to be iambic pentameter. The only reason it's called blank is that it omits rhyme, but many, many poems, very famous poems in English, are written in blank verse. Indeed, Shakespeare's lines are blank verse.

EP: That answers the question that there is poetry that does not rhyme.

JF: Oh yes.

EP: Can you tell me how many different kinds of poetry, I don't need to count them up necessarily, but you've named sonnet, free verse, blank verse, six or eight?

JF: Oh, there are legion, many, many more.

EP: Doggerel, what definition would you give to that? Other than being beneath your writing.

JF: No, I've written doggerel, and still do. Doggerel is substandard verse, usually written purposely just to for fun at a party, or something of that sort, of course some people write it seriously and think it's poetry. That's the trouble there.

EP: It can be of some length?

JF: Yes, any length.

EP: A limerick has more defined length.

JF: A limerick is a specifically structured poem. It has five lines; it has a rhyme scheme AABBA; and it has a pattern of meter. And the 3rd and 4th lines are one poetic foot shorter than the others. The limerick you could stress by just *da da, da da da*…. and that very structure makes limerick highly successful as humorous verse and at the same time obviates of being serious. You couldn't write for instance about a death of a friend in limerick form.

EP: Can you explain the creative process behind writing poems? For example, do you think of a statement you wish to make and then search out words that rhyme or a cadence pattern or imagery?

JF: Usually not because that's cart before horse, I think. That's putting the mechanics in the spotlight. I think that if you have a feeling, a motivation, an impulse, to express some emotion or what have you in poetic form, then these other aspects that you mentioned suggests themselves as they contribute to it. Because if it's a structured poem using rhyme and meter, then they should do as much for the tone and the effect as the imagery does as the diction does. It's true a limerick as I see.

EP: Have you found that there are some people able to "think" poetically more than others? Or can it also be learned? Second part of this same question: is it a subject that can be taught? You have taught it.

JF: I think there are three questions there.

EP: Yes.

JF: What about taking them one at a time, the first one then?

EP: Are there some people who think poetically or not?

JF: Better than others?

EP: Yes.

JF: I think that there are differences in artists and that's essentially what we're talking about. Some are better than others naturally, the second question?

EP: Take a person who is not that good naturally, can it be taught to them?

JF: Yes, to a degree. For example, well, I have an example, but I worked that experiment it can be taught to a degree. If the subject, the person learning, is, has the qualities of a poet, that person would of course go into orbit virtually, whereas someone else may just make a little progress. But then, yes.

EP: In the teaching of what you go through the various types that there are and explain the meter, the rhythm, of what iambic, what penta is?

JF: Yes, yes, but—

EP: You don't get them caught up in technique, but they have to know what the technique is in order to follow it.

JF: I think they should, even if they're not going to follow it. I think they should, you know, learn the rules before they decide they have the license to break them. I think that the most difficult thing in teaching poetry, Ed, is unteaching so many suppositions many people have about it which are wrong. But teaching poetry is easy. Poetry is natural. It is for everybody. It's the oldest literary form. It existed before there was a written language. And it's common to sophisticated societies and primitive societies. To young persons and old persons. When you were a child Ed, if you can remember that far back, maybe jump rope, jumping rope, you either inherited rhymes, “rich man, poor man, Indian chief,” not necessarily rhymes with metered verse, but you made up your own, didn't you?

EP: Is this how this began in the pre-writing-down-phase when they were wandering minstrels, or people with commercial pack trains, that went across the Middle East and so forth and carried the word from one area to another?

JF: Well, that's cultural diffusion and that does of course, has happens with commerce and wars and spreads ideas and literature and everything else. But the early poems were done before, as I say, there was a written language, and we don't know much about them except that there were

lays. There were short poems written about wars, exploits, heroes, and later on these things were agglutinated and organized, but saved by a Homer. We have our ethics.

EP: Yes.

JF: So, they've come along. But then you come to the, later the 7th century BC at time of Sappho and Pindar and [*unintelligible*] Sophist and so on. You had the evolving of the lyric, which was a short personal poem intended to be sung to the accompaniment a lyre. You buy sheet music today, it's going to say music by so and so, lyrics by somebody.

EP: And music is essentially poems.

JF: Well, many poems suggest music. Much music has been put to verse and the reverse. Many verses such as Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" which you'll be singing soon, if we put the music, subsequently.

EP: An easy thing to sing called, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

JF: The "Star-Spangled Banner" and I wouldn't say easy to sing it, yes.

EP: Tell us about haiku very briefly, a form what?

JF: Well, the haiku is borrowed from Japan and China. It's syllabic verse. It's five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, five in the third and that's it. It presents a concrete image and then usually relates it to a greater idea.

EP: A total of 17 syllables that make one statement.

JF: Yes, I don't fake it.

EP: Not words but syllables.

JF: Syllables. We do it in English, but it's really better adapted to pitch language I think than to a stress language.

EP: Are there are some scenes, and I think you've somewhat told me this, or events, or historic happenings that are perhaps better told or perhaps better remembered by their poetic description, than history?

JF: Probably. Probably, and you just gave me an example. The incident that Francis Scott Key writes about in "The Star-Spangled Banner" could be covered in historical prose. But his emotion on waiting the next morning to see whose flag was up there, called for something else.

So, he felt he had to express it in another way. I'm making no judgements on the quality of the poem, just a statement of difference of form.

EP: Would you say that Robert Frost for example, is a historian who wrote in poetry rather than, what I term is prose, which is ordinary speech or writing that is non-versine?

JF: I don't know what you mean by Frost as historian, though.

EP: Well, I guess I think of certain things that he recorded a lot history of, New England or events, times of year.

JF: *The land was ours before we were the land*?

EP: Yes.

JF: Oh, I know he's essentially a poet and a very good one, I think.

EP: Are there poets who have recorded historically?

JF: Yes, I think.

EP: On Revolutionary War?

JF: Well any, any subject matter is suitable to a poem, any. That's one of the misconceptions about poetry commonly held, is that poetry has to be pretty or something else. Can I write about this or that, it can? So, anything, you can find anything, about historical and what else.

EP: I know I suppose some things which are social issues, years later become history?

JF: Yes, oh yes. Agnes Saint Leger wrote all about it in poetry, in poetic form. Topical issues, social issues, historical issues, of course.

EP: Well thank you, Dr. Fulbeck and thank you ladies and gentlemen for listening to this week's edition of "Cal Poly Views," fifteen minutes devoted to discussing topics of current and general interest. If there are subjects which you would like to hear discussed by faculty or administrative experts from Cal Poly Pomona, please write to "Cal Poly Views," Office of News and Publications, 3801 W. Temple Ave, Pomona, 91768. We hope you'll join us again next week at the same time for another interesting interview when KWOW presents "Cal Poly Views." This is your host, Ed Pierce speaking.

End of interview.

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